

Gender in Japanese Youth Language^{*}

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Abstract

The current study discusses the gender aspect of Japanese Youth Language (abbreviated as “YL” thereafter) and focuses on real-life data. Specifically, it explores how YL is perceived differently between genders from the listener’s side. Deriving from a larger project, this paper reports quantitative data collected from an online survey that asks listeners to rate speakers’ personalities based on a short conversation. Mixed-effects regression models with gender and YL usage as fixed effects and YL words as a random effect were constructed for ratings of each personality. The results show that 1) regardless of YL usages, the male speaker is perceived to be less interesting, less intelligent, and less lovely than the female speaker; 2) regardless of genders, YL users are perceived to be more competitive; 3) the male users of YL are perceived to be significantly less interesting, less intelligent, with less leadership, and less competitive.

Key words

Japanese, youth language, gender, perception, personality

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1. Introduction

The advent and development of technology, especially text message, Internet, and Social Networking Service (SNS), introduce and spread enormous number of new expressions every day. Together with new words and trendy words, Japanese Youth Language (*wakamono kotoba*, abbreviated as “YL”) has been widely discussed by scholars from the aspects of morphology, phonology, functionality, characteristics, the reason of its popularity, and historical background, to name a few. However, few investigated real-life YL usages to my best knowledge. The current study takes a sociolinguistic approach and fills the gap by focusing on how speakers are perceived when they use YL in a real-life conversation. This research provides a newer view on the general public’s perception and argues against the stereotype that YL users are more active, outgoing, positive, willing to socialize, et cetera. It emphasizes on the necessity of updating our theoretical argument based on the latest real-life data.

Although one might have an impression that YL is mostly seen on the Internet in written forms, as a matter of fact, YL words such as “*wanchanaru*” (there is a possibility), “*tapiru*” (to drink bubble tea), and “*majimanji*” (really?!) can be frequently heard in spoken forms among young adults. Because this paper reports data of listeners’ perceptions of YL users, it focuses on the spoken forms of YL. YL usage in Twitter, YouTube, and newspapers are not reported here. Another point that is worth bringing up is the categorization of genders. I am aware of the existence of the LGBTQ group. However, for the sake of convenience, my analysis adopts a traditional, binary view of gender, and I think that investigating the LGBTQ group’s usage of YL words, including how they exploit trendy expressions to identify themselves, is an interesting topic to explore in the future.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides background studies on gender differences in YL usage as well as on perceptions of different variants. Section 3 introduces the methodology. Because this paper is derived from a larger project, I will only report data relevant to the current paper from my data pool. Section 4 reports quantitative results from online questionnaires, and Section 5 further explores how YL is perceived based on genders. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of YL

YL is defined in various literature (e.g., Kim 2019, 2018a, 2018b, Kim and Yu 2012). In general, YL is defined as popular words used by youth communities, where youth, according to Yonekawa (1998), refers to middle-school students to those in their thirties. As pointed out by Koyano (1990, cited in Kim 2019), people do not necessarily always start using YL after reaching a certain age. Instead, YL is a generic term that refers to popular words used by youths within a given time period. Meanwhile, YL shares some common features with trendy words, reflecting the social conditions of the era that it is mainly used in (Kuwamoto 2003). Yonekawa (1998:15) further extends this definition by stating that YL words are unique expressions that deviate from standard language usage and are used among young people to facilitate conversation and to entertain. Many definitions acknowledge individual differences (Kim 2019, Yonekawa 1998, Kuwamoto 2003). Here I cite a complete definition of YL by Kuwamoto (2003:114, translated from Japanese by the author):

- 1) Age ranges mainly from late tens to early twenties. Individual differences acknowledged.
- 2) Words should not be biased towards one specific group (such as only being used among

Mahjong fanatics or only among prostitutes).

- 3) Even though some words penetrate to or are known by older generations, this does not influence the categorization of YL (e.g., *KY*, *uzai*, etc.).

Intuitively, the terminology “youth language” suggests words that are obscure to non-youths, which presents an outsider’s evaluation by someone who does not belong to “youth.” It seems natural for people to label words they cannot comprehend as “youth’s words” because stereotypically, young people are a cutting-edge group who keep generating new ideas that the older generation has difficulty catching up with or understanding. Indeed, some YL words can be so specific that they are only understood by small communities, whereas some transcend age, spread across generations, and are understood by a wider public. The crucial point here is that the accessibility of YL is in fact defined by community instead of by age.

2.2 Gender differences in YL usage

Back in 1991, Akiyama, Uesugi and Suzuki’s survey of trendy phrases on students at Bunkyo University observed that female students used trendy words more frequently than male students. They also found that female students and male students prefer different words—in other words, the usage of different trendy words was contingent on gender. In addition, students were generally aware of the phenomenon of “speech disorder”, and that there was a strong disfavor of females speaking like males. They further found a gender difference on this perspective that compared to males, female students cared less about “speaking in a masculine way” and they thought much more neutrally about “speech disorder” change. In other words, females at that time already appeared to be less concerned about the conception of “gendered speech”, and they were willing to make a progress in speaking more freely (especially in terms of using more ideologically masculine words).

Yonegawa (1998:123-136) in his *Science of Youth Language* also reported a survey of 310 university students on their YL usage in 1994. According to Yonegawa and his students’ analysis, they found that among the five YL words that exhibited most gender differences, male students prefer “*bucchisuru*” and “*bakusuisuru*,” which start from *ha-gyo*¹ and reflect roughness, crudeness, and dirtiness. On the other hand, female students prefer “*ochasuru*,” “*dotakyan*,” and “*okini*.” They explained that females seem to prefer the “*o-*” prefix and why they use “*dotakyan*” more than male students was unclear.

Several scholars have provided some insights on reasons that attribute to these obvious gender differences. Tanimitsu (2006) analyzed differences of personality and characteristic between genders: he argues that from YL favored by different genders, it seems that males have less fortitude, less perseverance, less patience, and appear to be more doubtful. In contrast, females appear to suppress their emotions more and have stronger faith. In addition, different usages of pronouns and sentence-final particles reflect varied values of different genders—compared to males who attach more importance to social existence and independence, females’ view of life put more emphasis on emotional aspect. Kim and Seo (2014) provided a more contemporary account on gender differences. They pointed out that as gender equality improved, women now almost play an equal role as men, who now dominate the creation of YL, whereas a weakening process can be observed from men. Yonegawa (1998:103) also explained in a similar way that, different from previous days (especially Meiji Period), females have become more and

¹ *Ha-gyo* refers to a series of Japanese phonological units that start with a /h/ consonant.

more powerful, and they despise males, commercializing, materializing, and producing various negative YL about them, which reflects feminism and consumer society.

2.3 Studies on perceptions

The influence of phonological variants on listeners' perceptions particularly shed light on the current study, which include vowel shift (Podesva 2011), *-ing/-in'* variation (Campbell-Kibler 2007, 2008, Gratton 2016), released /t/ used by U.S. politicians (Podesva, Reynolds, Callier, and Baptiste 2015), and fronted /s/ among Copenhagen youth (Pharao, Maegaard, Møller, and Kristiansen 2014), to name a few. For instance, Podesva, Reynolds, Callier, and Baptiste (2015) found that social meanings associated with released /t/ are constrained by linguistic and social factors. They argued that "even though conventionalized associations between linguistic forms and meanings can be drawn upon to construct articulate personas, not all speakers can do so with equal effectiveness." (p.59)

Nagase, Oka, and Ikeda (1995) conducted a study that asks students to self-report their usage, attitude, and perception of expressions on campus. Specifically related to study, their results revealed that those who report themselves to possess more knowledge on expressions on campus were more active, competitive, self-revealing, social, initiative, and with more determination and leadership. Furthermore, those who not only possessed the knowledge but also used those expressions in daily life were more outgoing, self-centered, linguistically active, empathetic, and more result oriented. The personalities tested in their article are individually evaluated by five scholars including the authors, which are claimed to be highly related to social language use behavior. Therefore, the current study adopts the same personalities and asks listeners to rate them.

2.4 Research questions

Inspired by studies on the perceptions of phonological variants and intending to fill the gap between theoretical studies on YL usages of different genders and listeners' perception of YL usage in conversations, I constructed the following research questions to examine in this paper:

- I) How are speakers of different genders perceived in general? Namely, are listeners' perception in terms of gender biased without YL usage?
- II) Is YL playing a role in the perception regardless of gender?
- III) Are there any interaction effects between YL usage and gender on listeners' perception ratings?

3. Methodology

My original data pool for this project on Japanese YL includes other types of real-life data such as interviews, YouTube videos, and newspapers. However, only quantitative results from online questionnaires will be reported in the current paper.

3.1 Participant data

In order to examine how YL usage is perceived by the general public, I collected 113 online questionnaires mainly at the end of July 2019. I requested paid sampling service provided by Qualtrics to ensure a balanced population in terms of age and gender distribution. All respondents are native speakers of Japanese. Among them, 54 were male and 59 were female. The detailed distribution of age is summarized in Table 1. Ages were put into 5-year bins, and

for ages smaller than 25, I grouped them into an undergraduate bin (18-22) and a non-undergraduate bin (23-25).

Table 1. Age distribution of questionnaire respondents

Bin	18-22	23-25	26-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-60	>60
Count	5	10	12	25	17	21	7	6	8	2

3.2 Questionnaire design

There are 16 short conversations in total, and each participant only randomly listens to one of them. All conversations were recorded by a female undergraduate student and a male graduate student. Therefore, the current questionnaire design only investigates the perception of YL usage in a conversation, instead of written YL words on the Internet. The reason for using conversations instead of YL in isolation is because conversations provide some context for listeners to make sense of the words. The questionnaire adopts a $4 \times 2 \times 2 = 16$ design: four target YL words (*majimanji*, *suko*, *kusafukahi*, and *emoi*), controlled for the YL user's gender (male and female) and the word group (YL and non-YL expressions using common words of approximately the same meaning). A sample conversation can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. A sample conversation

Word	Word group	Gender	Japanese	English translation
草不可避 (<i>kusafukahi</i>)	YL	Female	F: 今日の番組、 <u>草不可避</u> ね。 M: そうそう!	F: Today's TV show is so <u>interesting</u> ! M: That's right!
	non-YL	Female	F: 今日の番組、 <u>面白くて笑っちゃう</u> よね! M: そうそう!	F: Today's TV show is so <u>interesting</u> ! M: That's right!
	YL	Male	M: 今日の番組、 <u>草不可避</u> ね。 F: そうそう!	M: Today's TV show is so <u>interesting</u> ! F: That's right!
	non-YL	Male	M: 今日の番組、 <u>面白くて笑っちゃう</u> よね! F: そうそう!	M: Today's TV show is so <u>interesting</u> ! F: That's right!

The questionnaire takes approximately 5 minutes to complete. It starts from an age-screening question to rule out participants younger than 18 years old. First, all respondents randomly listen to one of the 16 conversations. If the respondent listened to a conversation with a non-YL expression, he would directly be asked to evaluate 1) the age of the YL user; 2) the educational level of the YL user; 3) the masculinity/femininity of the YL user; 4) twenty personality items of the YL user, including "popularity," "likelihood to be welcomed," "sociability," "capability of communication," "fondness of fashion," "degree of handsomeness/beauty," "seriousness," "interestingness," "intelligence," "loveliness," "determination," "self-disclosure," "leadership,"

“competitiveness,” “activeness,” “empathy,” “positivity,” “preemptive-ness,” “outgoingness,” and “self-centeredness” (adopted from Nagase, Oka, and Ikeda 1995). For 1) the age and 3) the masculinity/femininity level, participants are asked to move a slider on a 1-100 scale to indicate their judgement; for 2) the educational level, participants need to choose from a dropdown list with options of middle-school, high-school, undergraduate, graduate school, and other (please specify); for 4) personality, participants have a matrix table where they need to rate each item on an 1-6 Likert scale, with 1 meaning “extremely low/bad” and 6 meaning “extremely high/good.” At last, they were asked to report their own gender (age is reported at the very beginning of the questionnaire).

If respondents listened to a conversation with a YL word, before proceeding to the rating activity, they would first answer a listening comprehension question that checked their understanding of the YL. If they wrongly answered this multiple-choice question, they would skip all rating sessions and be immediately directed to the end of the questionnaire to report their own gender. The rationale of this design is that I deem it unfair to have participants judge a speaker without understanding what he/she is talking about. Using this method, I excluded participants who might treat YL words as nonwords and made their decisions on the acoustic cues to gender alone. For those who correctly answered the comprehension question, they would further be asked whether they already knew the word without the context provided by the conversation, or they simply guessed its meaning through context. Because of page limit, the results of participants’ prior knowledge on YL words are reported in the current paper. After this step, they proceeded to the same rating activity. All questions in the online questionnaire were mandatory and non-skippable.

3.3 Data analysis

To reduce Type I error, mixed-effects regression models were constructed for each rated item. This method allows me to investigate the effect of word group (YL/non-YL), gender, and the possible interaction effect between them individually on each personality item. The random effect is set to be the YL word for all models. Subjects were not added as a random effect because each subject only contributed to one data point. Even though the data of rating Likert-scale are count data (integer) instead of real-valued (floating-point), according to Kizach (2014), mixed-effects linear models can be used reliably to fit Likert-scale data. The *p*-values reported are obtained from model comparison between a full model with the fixed effects against a reduced model without the effects in question (Winter 2013).

4. Results

Table 3 lists all the statistical significances identified from data, and non-significant statistics is not reported. Nonetheless, these statistical non-significances are by no means meaningless, which will be elaborated upon in Section 5. To spell discoveries out: 1) In terms of interestingness, people’s ratings go down by 0.83 for male speakers compared to for female speakers. In other words, listeners’ ratings of interestingness are lower when speaker is a male, by approximately 0.83. Furthermore, the interaction indicates that gender and YL usage are significantly inter-dependent on each other. Namely, when a male speaker does NOT use YL words (the control group), his rating goes up by 1.12. Put it in another way, when male speakers use YL words, his rating goes down by 1.12 point. 2) In terms of intelligence, people’s ratings go down 0.79 for male speakers compared to for female speakers. That is, listeners’ perceptions on intelligence are lower for male speakers. Moreover, the interaction effect suggests an inter-

dependence between gender and YL usage—when the YL user is a male, his rating goes down by 1.2 point. 3) In terms of loveliness, people’s ratings go down 0.77 for male speakers compared to for female speakers. 4) In terms of leadership, only an interaction effect was detected—people’s ratings were 1.37 point lower when a male speaker uses YL words. 5) In terms of competitiveness, people’s ratings go down 0.73 for those who chose the common-expression alternative. In other words, YL users are perceived 0.73-point more competitive than those who do not use YL. In addition, the interaction effect demonstrates that gender and YL usage are significantly inter-dependent on each other in the rating of competitiveness, i.e., when a male speaker does NOT use YL words, he will be perceived approximately 1.06-point more competitive.

Table 3. Summary of results

Personality	Fixed effects	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr (> t)
interestingness	gendermale	-.83	.34	-2.45	.016
	gendermale:treatmentcontrol	1.12	.42	2.65	.010
intelligence	gendermale	-.79	.35	-2.24	.028
	gendermale:treatmentcontrol	1.20	.44	2.69	.009
loveliness	gendermale	-.77	.34	-2.12	.034
leadership	gendermale:treatmentcontrol	1.37	.45	3.02	.003
competitiveness	treatmentcontrol	-.73	.35	-2.07	.042
	gendermale:treatmentcontrol	1.06	.48	2.20	.030

5. Discussion

Results from Section 4 can be reorganized based on general gender differences, perception differences on YL usage, and gender differences in YL usage. Section 5.1 answers Research Question 1; Section 5.2 answers Research Question 2, and Section 5.3 answers Research Question 3.

5.1 General gender differences

From Table 3, the fixed effect of gender exists in interestingness, intelligence, and loveliness, with the perception ratings of male speakers consistently lower than that of female speakers. In other words, regardless of using YL words or not, female speakers are generally perceived to be more interesting, more intelligent, and more lovely across the conversations. Considering that a short conversation discussing casual topics can barely provide hints on intelligence, an alternative interpretation is that the result of intelligence was a rating of the particular female voice of the speaker who recorded the audio files irrelevant of contexts provided by the conversation. Intriguingly, a fixed effect of gender was only observed in these three personalities, suggesting that people’s perceptions were mostly unbiased in terms of gender for the majority categories of personalities they rated. It is exciting to see that nowadays, gender alone will not affect others’ ratings on one’s personalities that much. Or such difference never exists, as Eckert (1989:248) stated, “Not only is it a mistake to claim that women are more or less innovative than men, but at this point in our research it is a mistake to claim any kind of constant constraint associated with gender.” She further claimed later in the article that, “But above all, it is problematic to seek the explanation of [working-class people’s] behavior in simple differentiation from the ‘opposite’ sex group. [...] What I will argue is that gender does

not have a uniform effect on linguistic behavior for the community as a whole, across variables, or for that matter for any individual. Gender, like ethnicity and class and indeed age, is a social construction and may enter into any of a variety of interactions with other social phenomena.” (p.253) Similarly, my result also suggests that a difference in listeners’ perceptions is usually not by gender alone, but rather various factors mixing together.

5.2 Perception differences on YL usage

The only fixed effect of YL usage/non-usage is competitiveness. That is, slightly contradictory to Nagase, Oka, and Ikeda (1995)’s study, although university students who possessed more knowledge on trendy expressions rated themselves as more competitive, the currently study shows that YL users are in fact perceived as less competitive by listeners. Nevertheless, equally interestingly, no other personalities demonstrated a statistical difference, and even for competitiveness, the perception difference seems to be the lowest, and the *p*-value was relatively high. This indicates that, in general, YL usage does not affect people’s perception on personalities that much. The finding further suggests that YL usage has been more or less normalized in the modern society where people are surrounded by new expressions every day. Without deep communication, one YL occurrence in one short conversation will not severely jeopardize his/her personality ratings in general.

5.3 Gender differences in YL usage

Regarding the inter-dependence between gender and YL usage, my results indicate that male users of YL words are consistently rated lower across the four personalities including interestingness, intelligence, leadership, and competitiveness, which further suggests a biased view towards YL users of different genders. Even though people’s perception on the speakers’ personalities does not differ much when we do not take gender into account, when we do consider the interaction effect between gender and YL usage, using YL is not favorable for male speakers, and the usage will jeopardize the perception of some of their personalities. In contrast, the general public seems to be more lenient on female users of YL; put it in another way, females are still considered to be the less marked, or the “default” group to use YL, and their usages are less likely to jeopardize others’ perceptions on their personalities.

6. Conclusion

The current research provides an updated view on how YL/non-YL users of different genders are perceived by the general public. Using data from face-to-face interviews and online questionnaires, the current study examines people’s perception of YL based on speakers’ genders. In summary, the results show that i) regardless of YL usages, the male speaker was perceived to be less interesting, less intelligent, and less lovely than the female speaker; ii) regardless of genders, the YL users are perceived to be more competitive; iii) male users of YL are perceived to be significantly less interesting, less intelligent, with less leadership, and less competitive.

For directions of future studies, it is worth examining whether perceptions detected in this paper holds true for youth language in other countries. As demographic information on rater’s gender and age were also collected, further analysis may explore how a rater’s gender influences his/her perception on speakers of different genders, as well as on the YL usage. Also, to reduce inter-speaker variances, I only asked two native speakers (one male and one female) in their twenties to record all conversation audios for this study. Thus, it is not clear whether listeners’

ratings are specific to those two particular voices, and possible research directions include i) increasing the number of speakers of each gender, but of the same age group, and testing whether the rating results hold; and ii) adding speakers from different age groups and examining how YL users' ages affect people's perceptions.

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